2026 Access in Circus Workplaces Survey Report

"Australian and global circus treats 'difference' as a virtue as long as it still fits within the confines of an able bodied, highly skilled performer who has had the opportunities to study and train at a professional level."

– Access in Circus Workplaces survey respondent

Overview

In 2024, TNA conducted a survey about access in Australian Circus and Physical Theatre (CaPT). Our aim was to better understand the experiences of disabled people who work or train in the sector, to support advocacy for fairer and more accessible CaPT workplaces.

In 2025, TNA underwent leadership and staff changes that affected the organisation's capacity. As a result, there were delays to analysing the survey results and we are publishing this report in 2026 – two years after the survey was conducted.

TNA gratefully acknowledges Loki Rickus for his leadership and drive in establishing this project and shaping its direction. Loki is a circus professional with a disability, and a dedicated disability advocate, who brought his expertise as a member of TNA's Circus and Physical Theatre Advisory Committee from 2021–23.

Methodology

The findings presented in this report reflect a sample size of 27 respondents.

While this might appear like a small number for a survey, it is important to acknowledge that the survey had a wide reach.

TNA kept the survey open for over three months, provided multiple ways of engaging with the survey, and publicised the survey through our membership, professional networks and various communications channels.

A total of 101 people engaged with the survey across three months, between 2 April 2024 – 19 July 2024. Of these, 27 respondents were eligible and provided complete responses.

The small sample size is reflective of:

- the nature of Circus as a niche and small subsector within the performing arts;
- disabled people being a marginalised and minority demographic within the performing arts and specifically Circus;
- the compounding effect of the intersection of being a disabled person in Circus; and
- the added barriers to disabled people engaging in consultation processes compared to the broader population.

As the survey results demonstrate, the nature of the Circus sector having high barriers to entry and practice mean that we begin with a limited pool of potential respondents.

For comparison, TNA's fourth biennial survey of independent artists in the performing arts, had 273 respondents in 2024. Of these 273 respondents, 38 respondents identified as disabled and 49 selected CaPT as a primary artform. However, only 4 out of 273 identified as disabled and working in CaPT. Benchmarking the number of respondents in this survey against our other research projects may help to contextualise the final sample size of 27 for this Access in Circus survey.

The Respondents

There were 27 respondents who provided eligible and complete submissions.

To be eligible, respondents had to fulfil three criteria:

- have lived experience of disability;
- be currently or previously working or training in the CaPT sector; and
- be over 18 years of age.

In the survey, 'disability' was defined as any limitation, restriction or impairment which restricts everyday activities, and has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months.

All 27 respondents selected at least one of the following options in the survey:

- Intellectual Disability
- Learning Disabilities and Disorders
- Autism
- Physical Disability, Disfigurement or Deformity
- Acquired Brain Injury
- Learning Difficulties and Disorders
- Neurological Disability
- Deafblind (dual sensory)
- Vision Disability
- Hearing Disability
- Speech Disability
- Psychiatric Disability or Mental Illness
- Other Chronic or Long-term Health Condition
- Non-Permanent/Short-term Injury or Health Condition

In this survey we used language and definitions from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Government's Institute of Health and Welfare. This is so the data we collected is most useful for advocacy work and funding applications. We acknowledge that some terms may be outdated, or not preferred/used by the community. We also acknowledge that these frameworks can reinforce the Medical Model of disability, and that respondents with lived experience of disability may therefore not identify with diagnostic categories.

Some respondents may also not feel comfortable identifying as disabled without a formal diagnosis.

Other Identity Data

It is worth noting that when we asked about how people identify, only 44% (12 out of 27) of respondents identified as disabled.

Other ways that respondents identified included Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (15%, 4 respondents), Person of Colour (4%, 1 respondent) and LGBTQIA+ (41%, 11 respondents).

No respondent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and no respondent identified as d/Deaf. As such, the experiences and barriers faced by D/deaf or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander CaPT professionals have not been captured by the survey.

11% (3 respondents) were based in regional or remote areas.

Areas of Practice

81% (22 respondents) were currently working in the Australian circus sector. 11% (3 respondents) had previously worked in the sector. 7% (2 respondents) were studying/training.

Respondents were asked to select all areas of the CaPT sector they currently work in or had previously worked in.

Practice area	Respondents
Performing Artist	**19**
Trainer/Coach	**11**
Arts Manager/Administrator	**10**
Producer	**8**
Director	**7**
Other	**7**
Technician/Operator	**3**
Educator/Teacher	**2**
Playwright/Dramaturg	**2**
Production/Stage Manager	**2**

Designer	**1**
Rigger	**1**
Musician/Composer	**0**

Table 1: Areas of Practice

Respondents commonly described themselves as working across multiple professional roles within the CaPT sector. Performing Artist was the most frequently identified role, followed by Trainer/Coach, and Arts Manager/Administrator.

The majority of respondents work in two or more roles, suggesting that many respondents simultaneously undertake artistic, educational, managerial and producing work, rather than working within a single professional role.

Most affected workspaces

Respondents were asked to select CaPT workspaces where they had experienced access barriers. Respondents could select more than one type of workspace, and more than one type of barrier (see Table 3 for list of barrier types).

Workspaces where respondents experienced barriers	**Number of reported experiences**
Circus education/training/classes (as a student)	90
Performing work (circus/arts company)	83
Arts admin/management or producing work	64
Performing work (corporate gigs)	59
Teaching/coaching work	56
Everyday life	50
On tour	47
Production, technical or design work	41
Performing work (making your own work)	40
Venues	32

Table 2: Number of reported experiences by workspaces

Participants most frequently reported barriers in **circus education and training settings**, followed by **performing work with circus or arts companies**.

Arts administration, corporate performance work, and teaching/coaching were also commonly identified as areas where barriers were experienced.

The 'Everyday life' category could be used as a baseline for understanding the workspaces that provide even less access than is experienced in respondents' daily life.

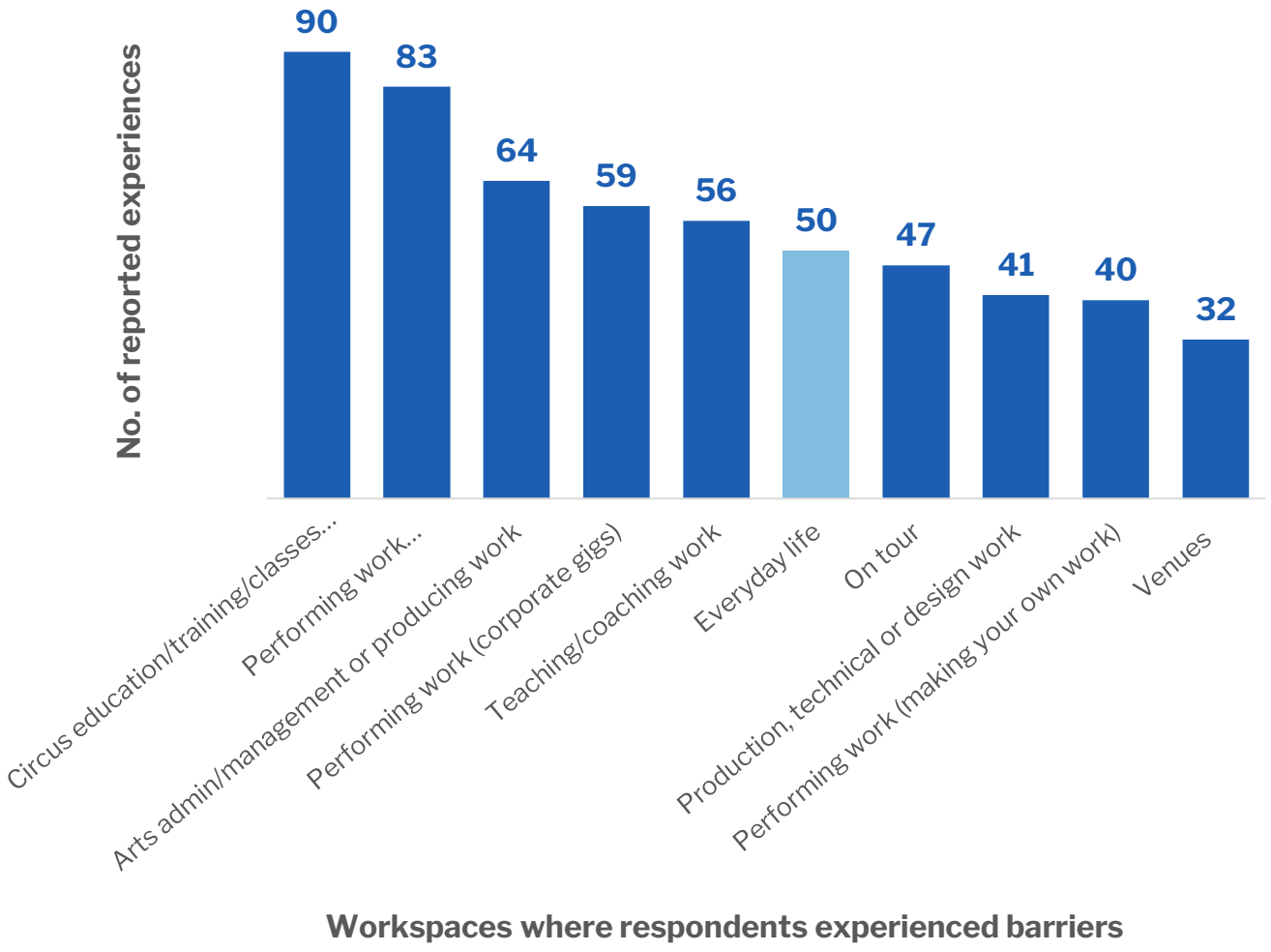

Figure 1: No. of reported experiences of barriers in types of workspaces

Most experienced barrier types

Respondents were asked to select types of barriers they had experienced in various workspaces (as above, in Figure 1).

Barrier type	Number of reported experiences
Lack of (or reduced) physical access	59
Lack of internal policies and embedded practices that support you	58
Lack of disability and accessibility awareness training	54
Lost or reduced income because of access requirements	54
Increased costs	52
Refusal to adjust systems/processes	44
Discrimination because of access requirements	43
Missed opportunities / not hired	38
Refusal to provide alternative delivery	36
Lack of mediation or advocacy support	36
Expectation of unpaid disability access training	34
Inaccessible application processes	29
Refusal of service/participation	25

Table 3: Number of reported experiences by barrier type

Structural barriers were prominent in the results, with lack of physical access, lack of supportive policies, and poor disability/accessibility awareness among the most reported issues.

Financial impacts were also significant, with lost or reduced income and increased costs ranking among the most frequently reported barriers.

It is also worth noting that every workspace area was selected at least once, indicating that respondents had experienced a broad range of access barriers in every area of work in the CaPT sector.

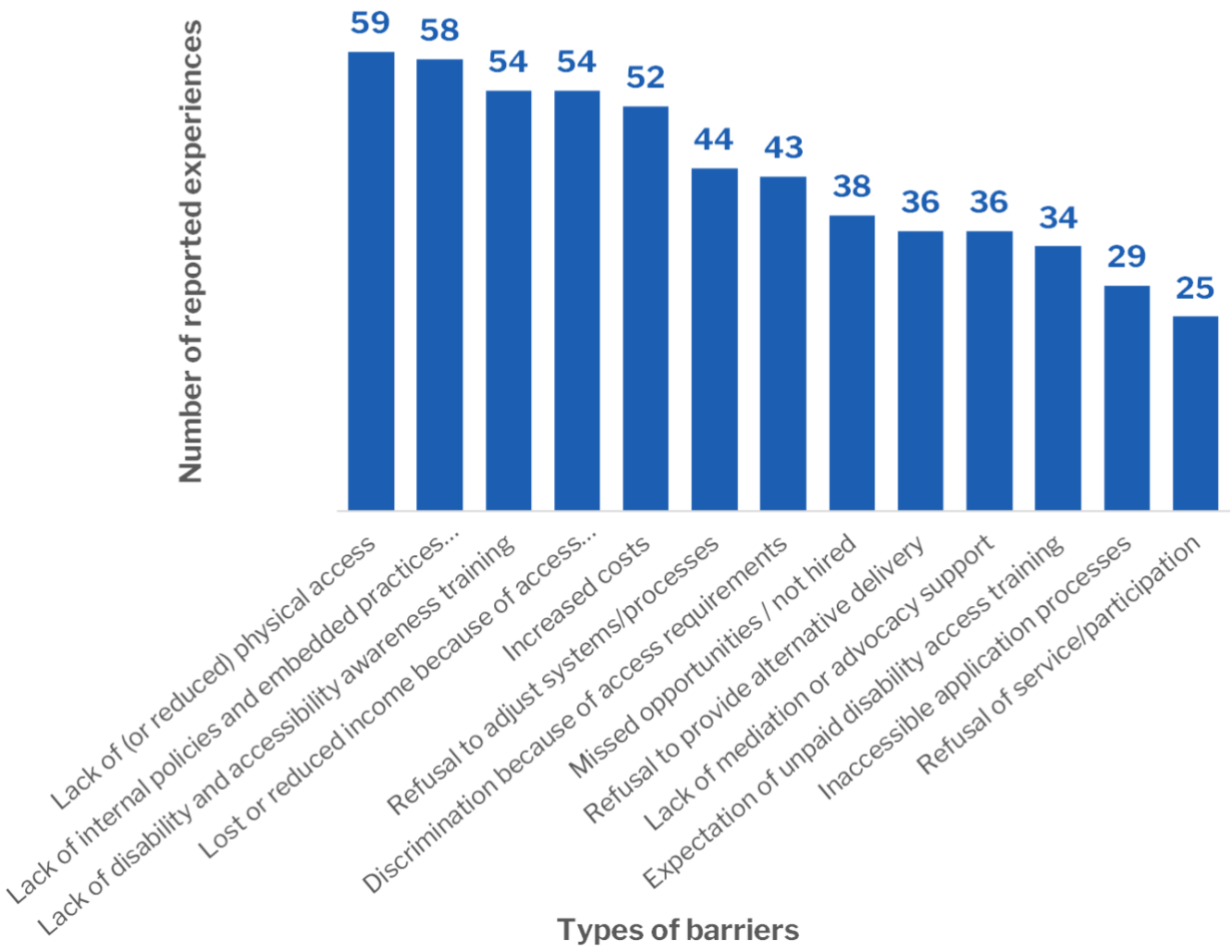

Figure 2: Number of reported experiences by barrier type

Qualitative answers

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide qualitative responses on their experiences of access barriers in the CaPT sector.

A recurring theme was **expectations on the physical body** and how **techniques of circus training exclude disabled artists** from accessing training.

"There needs to be an overhaul of how training is taught, as most of it hails from gymnastics or classic circus, where skills were taught to particular body types or by giving the same drills across the board."

"When you have someone that doesn't have the exact stereotypical body type that the training is focused towards, there is a lack of biomechanical understanding to be able to adapt and understand what will work for those bodies."

"Most tertiary education is lacking in adjustments for bodies that anatomically cannot complete what the institution deem 'required skills'. There's a big difference between someone who isn't progressing as fast as someone else and someone who isn't progressing because the tasks ask for something they can't viably accomplish with their body, and each time it gets assessed it's like a knife driving deeper into their confidence."

"I've personally been told 'I don't know how to help you, you're on your own' and 'we're not going to change one skill in an assessment for you, we don't expect you to be able to achieve everything'."

"Fast-paced environments of public / social classes doesn't allow space for students to request alternative drills to cater for access requirements, or even flag injuries at the start of a class."

Where respondents were able to access training as a community participant, some expressed there were limited or no pathways to professional careers. Responses suggested that while community contexts were willing to embrace inclusive or accessible circus practices, disabled circus practitioners felt marginalised in professional spaces that had narrow definitions of what 'professional' looked like.

"I started my circus career through being a participant in community circus programs as this was the only pathway to develop skills at the time. The first barrier was to break free from being the 'forever participant'. I had real enthusiasm though, and outward appraisal of the Australian circus culture as positive, communal and generally respectful. I was hopeful. Fast-forward twenty years and I am deeply traumatised by the levels of ableism and discrimination in circus in Australia."

"There is still a complete gap in today's industry which segregates circus and physical theatre performers to community levels by not offering or creating space for pathways to a professional career in the sector, and putting a cap on how far individuals are able to progress in what may be their chosen fields."

Some respondents described the **barrier of increased costs** in their experience of working in Circus and Physical Theatre.

"Circus training is expensive and disabled people already face extra financial burdens, so it's harder to access training".

"Survival as artists requires 'hustle' culture – very hard for disabled folks".

Another key theme was the **lack of understanding of disability and access** in CaPT and wider performing arts organisations, and **refusal to adjust systems and processes**.

"There are some fantastic individuals working hard to ensure the community becomes more accessible, but it's not yet reached the point where this access becomes standard. I'm optimistic for the future but I also don't want us to have to wait any longer to be included."

"I'm still a professional in this sector, yet the spaces I can occupy are growing smaller and smaller as a result of these systemic practices. This is compounded by inaccessible arts markets, venues and non-disabled producers blatantly or deceptively saying no to access."

The **inaccessibility of administrative and producing work** was mentioned several times, especially the process of applying for funding.

"Accessing grants/funding is difficult because completing the process is too hard/overwhelming."

Another theme was the challenge of maintaining COVID-safe practices during work. Immunocompromised respondents continue to be impacted by COVID and other illnesses, particularly where COVID-safe and other **transmission prevention practices are no longer widely in place**.

"Increased awareness of COVID and taking precautions such as wearing a mask or distancing has limited opportunities for me. For corporate works, when I have requested an area be roped off so that I can perform with the audience at an appropriate distance for social distancing, this has been denied."

The Future of Access

Respondents were asked what they would like the future of access in Circus and Physical Theatre to look like.

Some key ideas included:

- More accessible venues
- Recognising invisible disabilities/identifying without a formal diagnosis
- More accessible infrastructures (venues, systems, processes for artists, producers, creators)
- More funding for disabled work
- More flexible ways for disabled people to make work
- More accessible and inclusive training/classes practices and training spaces
- Support in applying for grants or more accessible grant applications
- More community building
- More programming of disabled works

"I would like to see more disability-led organisations stage works. I would like to see larger state-based companies learn from these smaller disability-led organisations in terms of implementing access strategies and models of care. I would like to see works created by disabled people programmed as mainstage works in theatres. I would like the productions of disabled artists to be respected and treated as of equal value, not as a charity case."

"Genuine care and offerings of possible services and support that will support me to only need to focus on my art and in turn give my best at an event."

"Apart from the obvious of making space for important physical and non-physical storytelling from our community, I would love to see the structures, venues, systems and processes within the circus ecology accept disabled producers, directors and creators with a lot more respect and open-mindedness."

Resources

The Diversability Circus website houses a range of resources developed by EU and UK partners championing best practice in Circus.

In particular, 'Circus for Everybody: The Trainer's Toolkit' aims to widen access to circus training and break down the barriers to circus for D/ deaf and disabled people.

It was created by Extraordinary Bodies, Circomedia, Cirque Bijou, Diverse City and The National Centre for Circus Arts have been working together to identify and overcome access barriers in their performance and training organisations.